

Plan would move inmates closer to urban areas

Re-entry centers would offer job training, drug treatment in months before -- and after -- release

Mark Martin, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau

Monday, February 12, 2007



(02-12) 04:00 PST Sacramento -- After decades of sending lawbreakers to giant, remote prisons, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is pushing for a major change that would shift thousands of inmates to smaller facilities much closer to the state's urban centers.

In separate proposals involving juvenile offenders and male and female adult inmates, Schwarzenegger is calling for housing inmates in the counties they come from -- and will return to once their terms are up. Taken as a whole, the plans could mark a profound shift in where and how California detains its booming prison population.

The change is supported by criminal justice experts, who have long criticized the state's policy of building mega-prisons in the most rural corners of California. Smaller facilities in the urban counties where virtually all of the state's 172,000 inmates live would allow inmates more contact with their families and allow corrections officials more opportunities to help inmates find jobs and work on problems like drug addiction.

But the governor's proposals have some officials worried that the state may simply push the responsibility of housing and treating inmates onto counties, and local opposition to placing felons closer to heavily populated areas seems likely. Prison reform advocates also note that more than three years after Schwarzenegger took office, there is no track record to suggest his Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation can successfully pull off the kind of change the governor is proposing.

Nonetheless, administration officials and county sheriffs are negotiating on a key piece of the governor's plan that would create as many as 10 new re-entry facilities for male prisoners in urban

counties. And Schwarzenegger has quietly dropped a call he made last year to build two new prisons in the same style the state has built in the past.

"What we're talking about now is a total change in the way we do corrections in this state," said Joan Petersilia, a UC Irvine criminologist and author of a 2003 book that has sparked a new emphasis around the country on helping prisoners re-enter society.

Petersilia was a critic of many of the governor's proposals last year to handle overcrowding, but she has recently been working with the governor's corrections secretary on the re-entry center proposal.

During a 20-year period that ended in 2004, nobody built prisons faster and more efficiently than California. Under three governors, California opened 22 new prisons, mostly in far-flung areas of the state. The state won awards from national planning groups for its ability to fast-track such enormous public works projects.

"We were the best when the goal was to build them as big as we could and as fast as we could," said Jim Tilton, a longtime corrections administrator who became head of the department last year.

Tilton now says the building binge -- in which California created some of the largest prison campuses in the world -- was a mistake.

California's corrections infrastructure is simply not designed to do anything other than warehouse inmates and is a contributing factor to the state's nation-leading recidivism rate, Tilton argues. Seven out of every 10 California inmates return to prison for a new crime or parole violation.

Walk into any of the state's 33 prisons, and the crowds can be overwhelming.

At Pleasant Valley State Prison, located a few miles off Interstate 5 in rural Fresno County, four yards teem with inmates in a prison that houses more than 5,100 people. More than 140 inmates live in one gym, where triple bunk beds make it impossible for guards to see anyone coming at them. Prisoners hang shirts around their beds for privacy, and fights break out when someone takes too long in the overcrowded showers.

More than 1,200 inmates at this prison are on waiting lists to get a job or take classes.

"I'm sitting here doing nothing," Robert Hunt, 41, an inmate serving an eight-year sentence on a drug charge, said during a recent interview with The Chronicle.

Hunt said he wants to learn how to operate a computer, but the in-prison educational tests he has taken suggest he can barely read.

Experts note no other state has such big prisons.

Petersilia said Ohio, which holds less than a third of the number of inmates California does, has the same number of prisons. New York has more than twice the prisons for a smaller inmate population.

The sheer size of the structures -- 24 of them house more than 4,000 inmates -- leads inmates to join gangs to stay safe, said Jeanne Woodford, the former corrections secretary and warden at San Quentin State Prison.

"It is all about survival," she said.

"Inmates are very lucky if they find someone on staff who has the time to take an interest in them," said Woodford, who worked for more than 20 years in the prison system and is now the chief adult probation officer for San Francisco.

Schwarzenegger has several proposals that call for a less remote and institutionalized experience for convicts.

He has called for shipping more than 1,000 juvenile offenders from large state facilities such as N.A. Chaderjian Youth Correctional Facility in Stockton and Preston Youth Correctional Facility in the Sierra Nevada foothills to smaller programs in the counties the wards come from. The state would incarcerate less than half of the population it does now, and reserve its spots for the most violent juveniles.

The governor also wants to relocate 4,350 adult female inmates in prison for nonviolent crimes from the state's three large women's prisons to community-based facilities.

A third proposal -- to create 5,000 to 7,000 new beds for male inmates in so-called re-entry centers -- has generated the most discussion in Sacramento so far.

Tilton said the idea is to send inmates to re-entry centers in the last year of their term. There, they would be entered into programs ranging from drug treatment to job training that would continue for several months after they are released.

By housing inmates in a secure facility in the county they are from, the counselors and job trainers could work with a prisoner both behind bars and as he gets out, Tilton said, something that is impossible if an inmate does his entire prison term in a facility hours from where he will be on parole.

Petersilia supports the governor's proposal, saying there is virtually no evidence to suggest in-prison rehabilitation programs work unless there is some follow-up once the inmate leaves prison.

"What we do know is we can cut recidivism by starting a quality program in prison and then continuing it with aftercare," she said.

The proposed centers have garnered some support from county sheriffs.

The California State Sheriffs' Association is currently negotiating with the Schwarzenegger administration on a deal that would create joint county/state facilities, with the state paying 75 percent of the building costs. The state and counties would then split the operational costs and provide rehabilitation programs for both jail inmates and state prisoners.

Facing major overcrowding problems of their own, many sheriffs see a benefit in adding beds at state expense -- Schwarzenegger has proposed spending \$4.4 billion of state bond money.

San Francisco Sheriff Michael Hennessey, Alameda County Sheriff Greg Ahern and San Joaquin County Sheriff Steve Moore all said in recent interviews they were interested in opening a re-entry center in their counties. Supervisors in Santa Barbara County voted unanimously in December to support a center there.

There are several potential sticking points, however.

Sheriffs oppose a Schwarzenegger proposal to keep anyone sentenced to less than three years behind

bars in county jails, not state prisons, and may balk at the re-entry center deal unless the governor backs down.

And Ahern said there could be community resistance in the Dublin area, where the county currently has its jail and land where a new facility could be located.

"You can dress something up and make it look good, but a lot of people don't want a prison in their neighborhood," he said.

Who would staff the new centers also remains to be negotiated. Both Ahern and Hennessey said they would insist on deputies -- not state prison guards -- working in facilities on county land.

Tilton admits there is no model around the country like the one he is proposing, and the concept of re-entry centers is new enough that there is little evidence yet that they will reduce recidivism.

Sen. Michael Machado, D-Linden (San Joaquin County), who is chairman of a Senate budget subcommittee with oversight on corrections, said the re-entry centers "are a big-ticket budget item without a track record."

Still, Machado agreed with the overall concept that the state should stop building big, remote prisons.

"Expansion should occur where the offenders are coming from," he said.

THE GOVERNOR'S

PROPOSALS

1,000 +: Juvenile offenders would move from large state facilities to smaller county programs

4,350: Adult female inmates in prison for nonviolent crimes would move to community-based facilities

Up to 7,000: New beds for male adult inmates would be created in re-entry centers in their home

counties

E-mail Mark Martin at markmartin@sfchronicle.com

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/12/MNGT0034001.DTL>

*This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

© 2007 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)